

"PLAYING GAMES  
Matthew 11:7-19  
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"Games People Play" is the title of a book written several years ago by the late Eric Berne, a California Psychiatrist. It became a best seller, and even if people did not entirely comprehend the psychiatric theory in the book, the title and the idea of "playing games" became a part of the common vocabulary. Berne, however, was very serious: he was the leader of a revolution in the world of psychiatry called Transactional Analysis that has spilled over into many areas of life. Part of T.A. is the idea of "I'm OK - You're OK", and the concept that the personality is the sum of three separate ego-states called Parent, Adult and Child.

For our purposes, this morning however, I would like to think about the matter of game playing. Berne suggested that most human intercourse is made up of engagements, and that there are two types of engagements, pastimes and games. Pastimes are simply the way we ordinarily structure or fill up our time. Transactions with other people are straight forward, honest, there are no hidden agendas. Pastimes can be enjoyed for their own sake. Going to a movie, reading a book, engaging in honest conversation are pastimes.

A game happens when the transactions between people are not what they seem. That is, something hidden is going on. Berne describes a game as "...a recurring set of transactions, often reiterative, superficially plausible, with a concealed motivation; or more colloquially a series of moves with a snare or 'gimmick'." (Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy. P. 104)

Berne assigned names to the games people ordinarily play - not only in therapy, but in normal social intercourse. One of the simplest to identify - because we've all played it at one time or another is called: "Why Don't you - Yes But". It can be played by any number. One player, who is 'it', presents a problem. The others start to present solutions, each beginning with - 'Why don't you..?' To each of these the one who is it objects with a 'Yes, but...' A good player can stand off the rest of the group indefinitely, until they all give up whereupon 'it' wins." (P. 104)

A game of "Why Don't You .. Yes, But" sounds like this:

My husband never builds anything right

Why doesn't he take acourse in carpentry ?

Yes, but he doesn't have time

Why don't you buy him some good tools?

Yes, but he doesn't know how to use them.

Why don't you hire a carpenter?

Yes, but we can't afford to

Why don't you just let him do it his way and live with it?

Yes, but the whole thing might fall down.

That's a game because the person who presented the problem didn't want solutions. The game sounded plausible but it really wasn't played for its ostensible purpose. What really was happening here, Berne suggests, is that the person with the problem needed to gratify her child - and she succeeded by transforming her friends into a group of parents dispensing wisdom to the helpless one. Meanwhile she won the game by confounding her parents, one after the other.

Other fairly common games that Berne identified are: ["If it weren't for you ..."] a favorite marriage game.

Schlemiel, Alcoholic, Uproar, Ain't it Awful, You Got Me Into This, There I Go Again, Let's You and Him Fight, and NIGYSOB - the translation of which would not be altogether appropriate from the pulpit.

The purpose of playing games is essentially to avoid intimacy, to replace honest adult communication with meaningless ritual. In turn, that allows the player to avoid changing the way he thinks or the way he behaves. And to win a game is simply to be confirmed and supported in the way you are already thinking or acting. The person who won the game of "Yes, But" which I cited, successfully managed to avoid solving the problem and to be confirmed as a hapless, helpless child whose difficulties were simply too overwhelming ever to be resolved.

Game playing is as old as the Bible. Adam tried to play a few rounds of ["If it weren't for you"] with God in the Garden of Eden. ["The woman whom you have to be with me, given

she gave me of the tree and I did eat". And we can assume that Adam and Eve lived out their days playing variations of ("If it weren't for you") along with ("You got me into this.")

One time Jesus caught his contemporaries playing a game. He was apparently talking with a crowd of people, when several friends of John the Baptist showed up with a message. John - who was now in prison wanted to know if Jesus was the messiah or should they be looking for another. Jesus answered that the blind are seeing, the lame walking, the poor are hearing good news: that is, the signs of the Kingdom are occurring ("Yes, I am the one").

Well, someone in the crowd must have guffawed and then they all snickered a bit. After all, John was slightly ridiculous, wearing those odd clothes, living in the desert, eating locusts, and now he was in prison - asking the obvious. It really was amusing.

Jesus' response was blunt and hard. John was no reed blown by the wind. He was a prophet and more than a prophet. He spoke the truth - but people rejected him because he was too ascetic, too tough, demanding, rigid, a religious fanatic.

At the same time, the same people were in the process of rejecting him - Jesus - for precisely the opposite reasons. He was a libertine, they said: a glutton and a drunkard: he was seen at wedding parties, in the homes of sinners and the company of prostitutes.

It was too much! And it reminded him of nothing so much as a group of children playing in the market place. It is one of the more striking similes in the New Testament. Children played two favorite games: Wedding and funeral: both events were public and demonstrative in Jesus' day. A wedding was a time of singing and dancing, eating and drinking that lasted as long as a week. A funeral included a procession and hired mourners wailing, throwing dirt on their heads, beating their breasts. All in all - good grist for childish games.

In Jesus' story two games are going on at once. One group wants to play wedding - the other wants to play funerals. They can't agree: nothing gets done. Those who heard that little vignette would have felt its sting. It was on the mark. It was a precise description of the game they were playing first with John the Baptist and now with him.

It suggests, also, that they - particularly the religious elite were playing a game called religion. A game in which ritual and ceremony mattered but nothing more: a game in which only the law mattered - but nothing else a game in which a man could buy a pigeon, have it slaughtered as a sacrifice to God, and then cheat his employees. It was a game in which good men could pretend to be devout and then criticize both John and Jesus because they were too real, too honest.

It is a brutal and judgemental story about religious phoniness in every age, and to hear it is to feel indicted for the way we play at our religion.

Not long after "Games People Play" became so popular, another little volume hit the religious press under the title, "Games Christians Play". It's a funny little book ~~satirical~~ satirical, outlandish, and all too often, true.

A favorite game played by church people is "I'd love to, but", according to the authors. The person who is 'it', has been asked to do a job - and instead of stammering says with great conviction, "Oh, I'd really love to, but.." and then fills in the sentence with whatever comes to mind. That game is highly recommended for people who have been playing "If it weren't for my husband or wife I'd come to church" and suddenly their spouse "gets religion".

Other games played in the church are:

"I don't know why they don't do something about...." the ubiquitous 'they' must remain undefined.

"Nobody, bothered to ask me about it.."

"I've got a great idea.."

"I don't mean to criticize, but ..."

"I didn't get a thing out of it"

"My Bible's more underlined than yours" - a peculiar Baptist game

And of course, "Mary Martyr", about whom everybody said "What would we do without her?"

My own pastoral experience has revealed two frequent games that are really variations on "I'd love to, but". They are:

[ "We ought to come more often, but..." ] the last phrase varies: [ "its the only morning we have to sleep, ... we're so busy during the week... we've gotten out of the habit - or, and this is a little like a double-header: we ought to come more often, but we don't get anything out of it." ] The minister can try to play [ "Why don't you" ] - but he's going to lose. He can argue - and lose - the member. Or he can excuse the person by agreeing with the reason for not coming and still lose.

The other game is, [ "We'd like to give more, but..." ] and there is no way to win that one either.

Now, we've had a little fun and hopefully have been able to laugh at ourselves a bit. We all play games - sometimes unintentionally, most of the time superficially and harmlessly. But now let's consider the possibility that the whole thing of religion is a game for us. That is, like the contemporaries of Jesus, we may be playing a game called religion the purpose of which is to allow us to look and feel religious but which actually helps us to avoid intimacy with others, with God, and insulates us from changing anything we are thinking or doing.

It's interesting that one of the post World War II phenomena in America has been a major revival of interest in religion. The statistics are impressive: more people going to church, joining the church, erecting new church building, buying religious literature, going to religious movies, arguing about prayer, Bible reading, the polls show that 94% of the American people profess belief in God - an astounding statistic.

The other interesting phenomenon is that at the same time - while we are in the midst of a major revival of interest in religion, the influence of religion on life has been declining. Less than one half the people feel that religion effectively influences our national life. T. W. Adorno, Director of the Canadian Institute of Social Research reports that: [ "Religion does not play such a decisive role within the frame of mind of most people as it once did; only rarely does it seem to account for their social attitudes and opinions." ] (The Comfortable Pew, Pierre Berton, P. 55)

Commenting on the church in Great Britain, Alastair MacIntyre discovered that [ "80% of the population uses the church only to celebrate birth, marriage, death and Christmas." ] And while the statistics would not be quite that high in America it is

definitely the direction we are now going.

A Japanese scholar observed: "In the most crucial issues of life, friendship and love, marriage and home, death and burial, the Christian obeys submissively the dictates of American Culture and public opinion rather than the claims of the Gospel". (Ibid. P. 56)

To cite two very specific examples: I am asked regularly to baptize infants and marry couples who do not belong to the church, have no intention of taking the church seriously, and couldn't care less about the church. I am telephoned regularly by young ladies shopping for a place to be married - who don't know me - or the Presbyterian Church - and whose major concern and opening question is "How much do you charge for a wedding?"

Now, my church, the church that ordained me, and to which we all belong believes some very specific things about marriage and baptism. In our tradition it is the Church that does both - not the particular clergyman. Both are seen as functions of the congregation, performed within the community of faith. Neither are simple little ceremonies which, for a fee, we perform without any regard for the particular congregation.

And I cannot - in good conscience - agree to do it. For what it is saying is that religion is just a game - a ritual that doesn't really matter.

Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote about children: "The doings of grown folk are interesting only as the raw material of play... and they will parody an execution, a death bed.. or a funeral with all the cheerfulness in the world." (cited by G.A. Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus, P. 51)

To play as a child is to pretend to make believe. It is to know that whatever you do it will have no lasting effect. And there is a lot in life that is like that. I think particularly of the increasingly popular and acceptable practice of playing house - playing "marriage" by living together. What's really wrong with that, I believe, is that it's a game: there are no permanent commitments - therefore there is no lasting effect as a result of what one does. One can enjoy the ritual - the form - without the commitment and love and tears of honest life together.

There is a lot in life that encourages us to play games - and increasingly there is

a lot about institutional religion that encourages the same kind of behavior. Someone has noted that ["joining the typical protestant middle-class church is not significantly different from joining the Kiwanis"]. And, it might be added, once in it's probably easier to stay in. We make ridiculously minimal . . . demands on each other here, and while I've not sure I want it otherwise, one of the by-products is that people play with religion.

To put that in perspective consider the dilemma of the Presbytery of Wabash  
Valley's Budget Committee of which I am a member. Money is very tight: mission giving  
is down - projects must be phased out. So, we've decided to attack instead of retreat -  
and after doing some calculating discovered that if we got \$1.00 per week from each  
Presbyterian in the Presbytery we'd have more money than we'd know how to spend.  
In fact - if we got a dollar from each Presbyterian - twice a year, we'd more than  
meet every current local mission need.

We play games with money in the church and call it stewardship. We beg and plead all the while dealing with tiny little amounts of money that are relatively insignificant.

Or consider our attitude about the church in the world. We don't want religion to matter in those life and death issues such as peace, welfare, poverty, justice. We don't want the National Council getting involved at Wounded Knee - even though the federal Government has totally bungled every effort at a sensible and mature settlement. We don't want the church changing the world - and we don't want our religious beliefs changing us.

There is no happy ending to this sermon - in fact no ending other than the lives  
led by the people who hear it.

The Old Testament Prophet Micah simply and eloquently defined the essence of honest religion, stripped of all games.

"and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and walk humbly with your God."

What's left when we determine to stop playing the game of religion and become adult Christians? Just what there was at the beginning, ~~when that courageous man told~~

*and then*

~~a story about children at play~~ - God's love, God's grace - Christian love and compassion and sacrifice and joy.

I would let it go with that - and with some very sage words of St. Paul: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways." AMEN

Father, it's not that we want to play games. We do want faith and love and joy. But sometimes we get off the track. Forgive us - and help us: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN